DARK HORSE MANGA
BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL
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TRICKSTER 2 OF 4
64 PAGES
HIROAKI SAMURA
BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL
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BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

art and story by

HIROAKI SAMURA

translation by DANA LEWIS

lettering and retouch by TOMOKO SAITO

special thanks to KOSUKE FUJISHIMA and MICHAEL GOMBOS

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MANJI

Immortal *rōnin*, vowed to protect Rin and aid her in her quest for revenge

RIN

Last heir of the Mutenichi-*ryū dōjō* destroyed by the Ittō-*ryū*, seeks Anotsu's death

ANOTSU

The leader of the Ittō-*ryū* sword school, targeted by the Mugai-*ryū*

MAGATSU

Formidable Ittō-*ryū* swordsman

GIICHI

Mugai-*ryū* assassin

WAYAN KURISHIGE

Scarred, tenacious Ittō-*ryū* warrior

THE STORY SO FAR

Infected by *kessen-chu*, mystical bloodworms which can heal all wounds and grant their host immortality, Manji's bloodthirst led to the capture and murder of his sister. To atone for this and for the 100 innocent people who died at his hand while he served a corrupt lord, Manji vowed to slay 1,000 evil men in exchange for the release of death.

A surprise attack by the Mugai-*ryū* decimates a batch of new Ittō-*ryū* recruits, and Anotsu rallies his surviving troops to dish out swift vengeance. Manji agrees to meet with the head of the Mugai-*ryū*, Habaki Kagimura, but he must first rescue Rin from three Ittō-*ryū* heavies. Armed with *kessen-satsu*, the only poison known to damage Manji's immortal blood, these Ittō-*ryū* warriors clash with Manji and Giichi at the Ishioshigun Quarry ...

designer DEBRA BAILEY editor PHILIP SIMON publisher MIKE RICHARDSON

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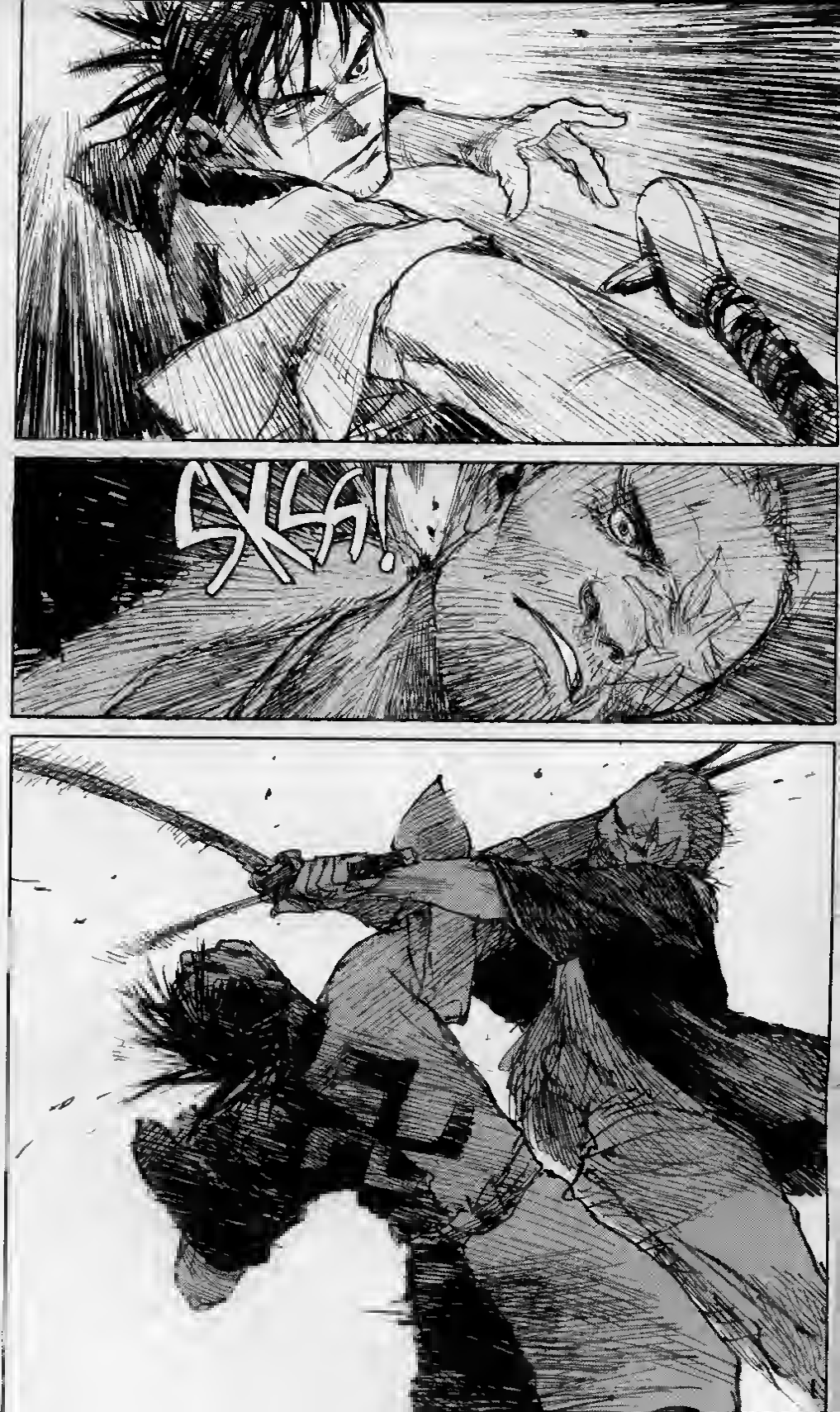
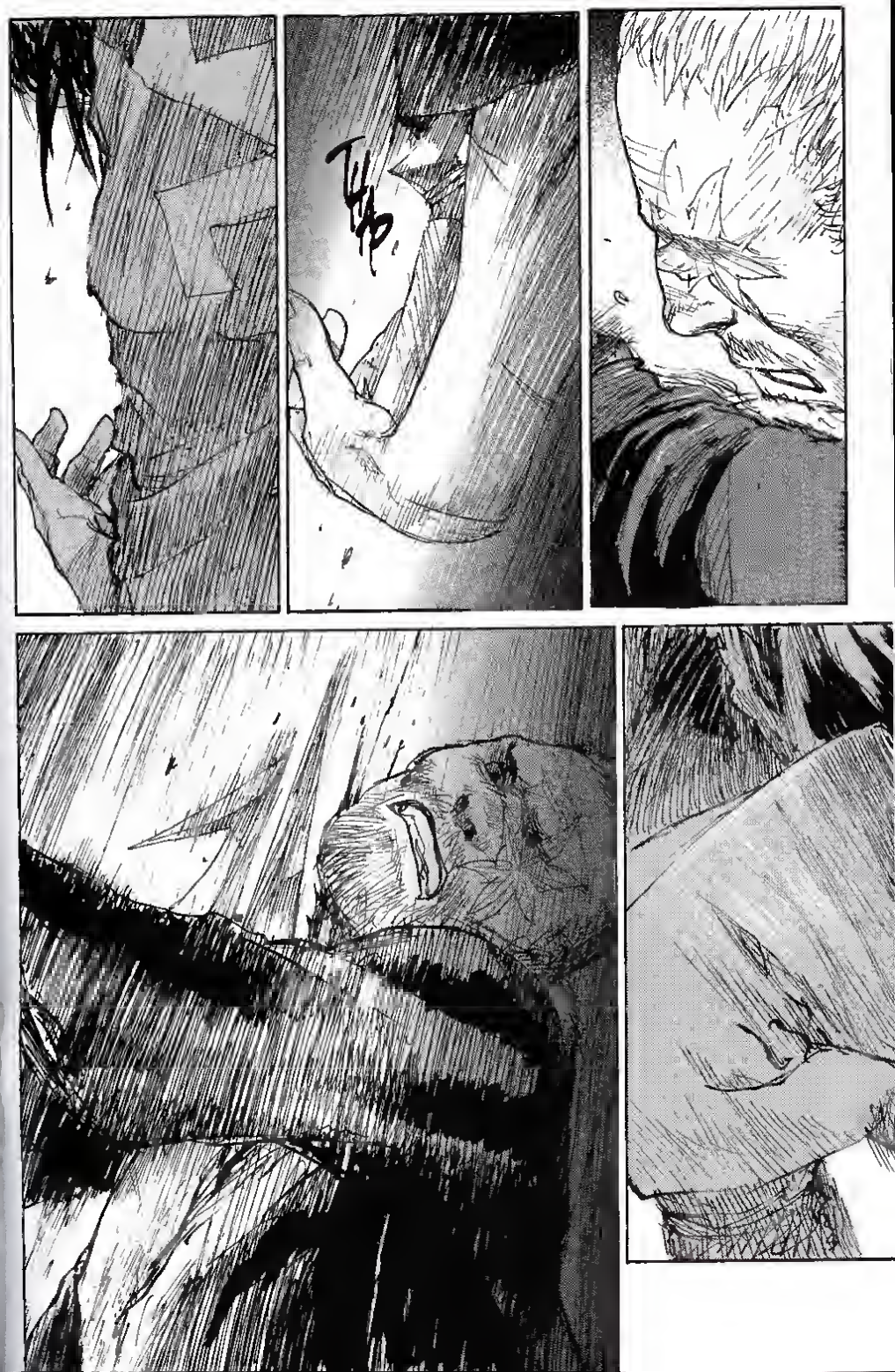

SKSA!


THUD

BRRRP
?!
HEH
CHUK

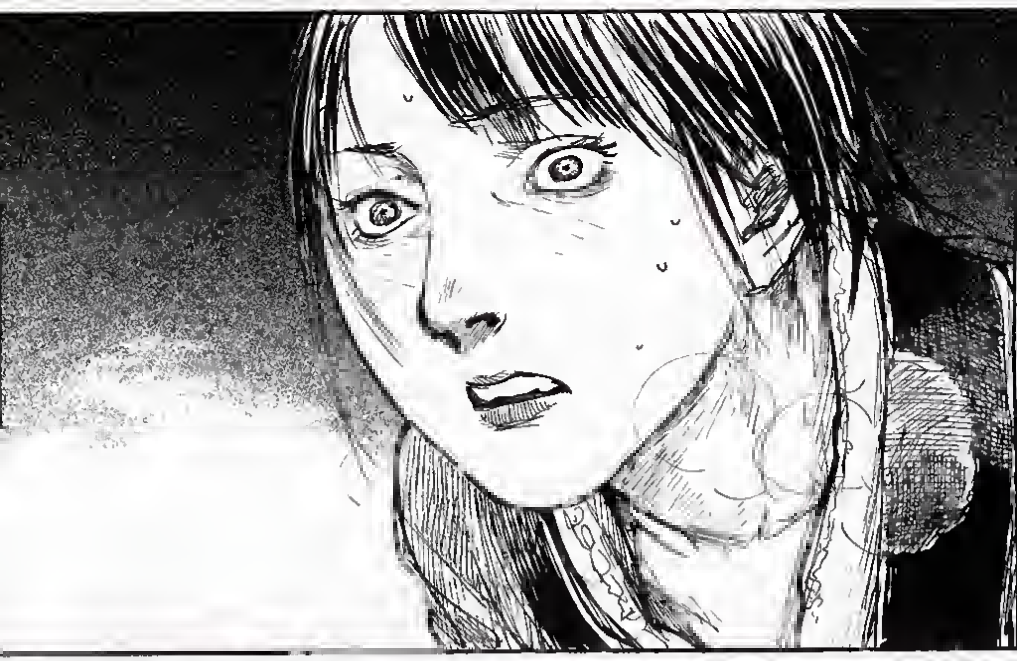
SHRK!
HRR YAAAH!
TENK!
:hahf!:
HURR..
:hahh:

?!
HRRK...
GUOH!!

無限の住人

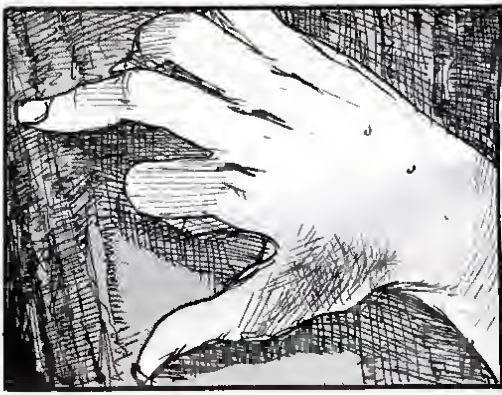
TRICKSTER

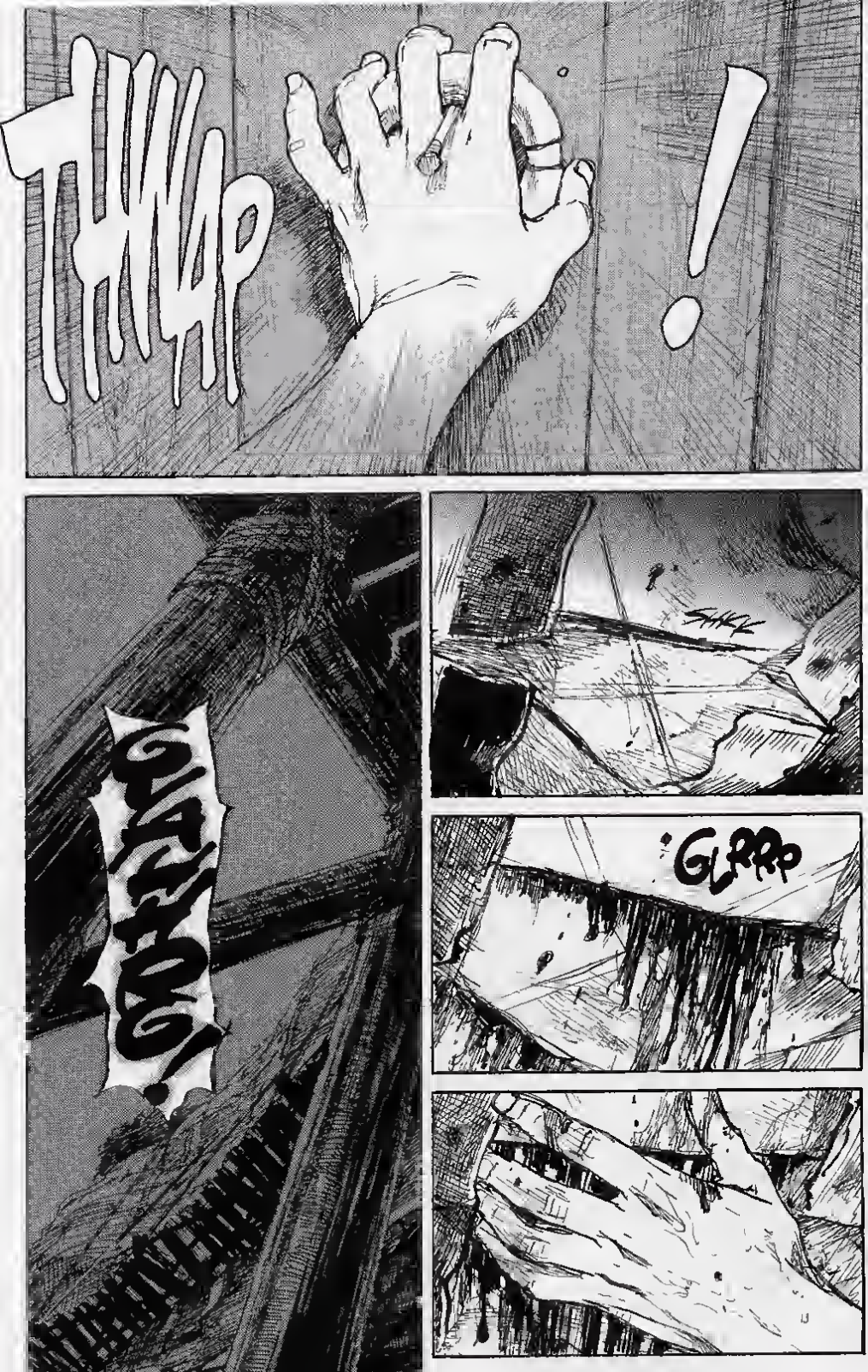
-part two-



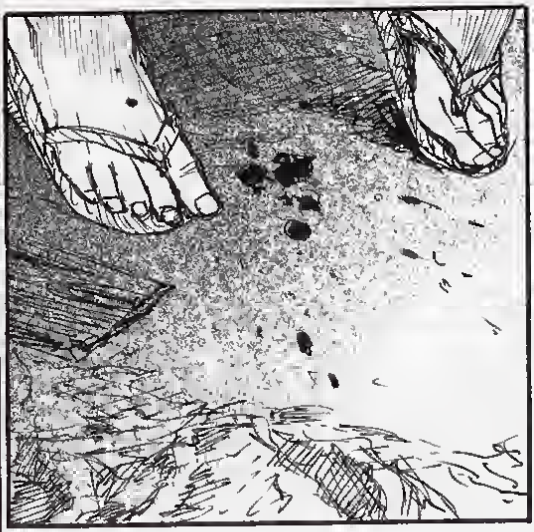
:hahh:
:haff:
:hahf!:

:hahf:
:haff:
:hahh:...



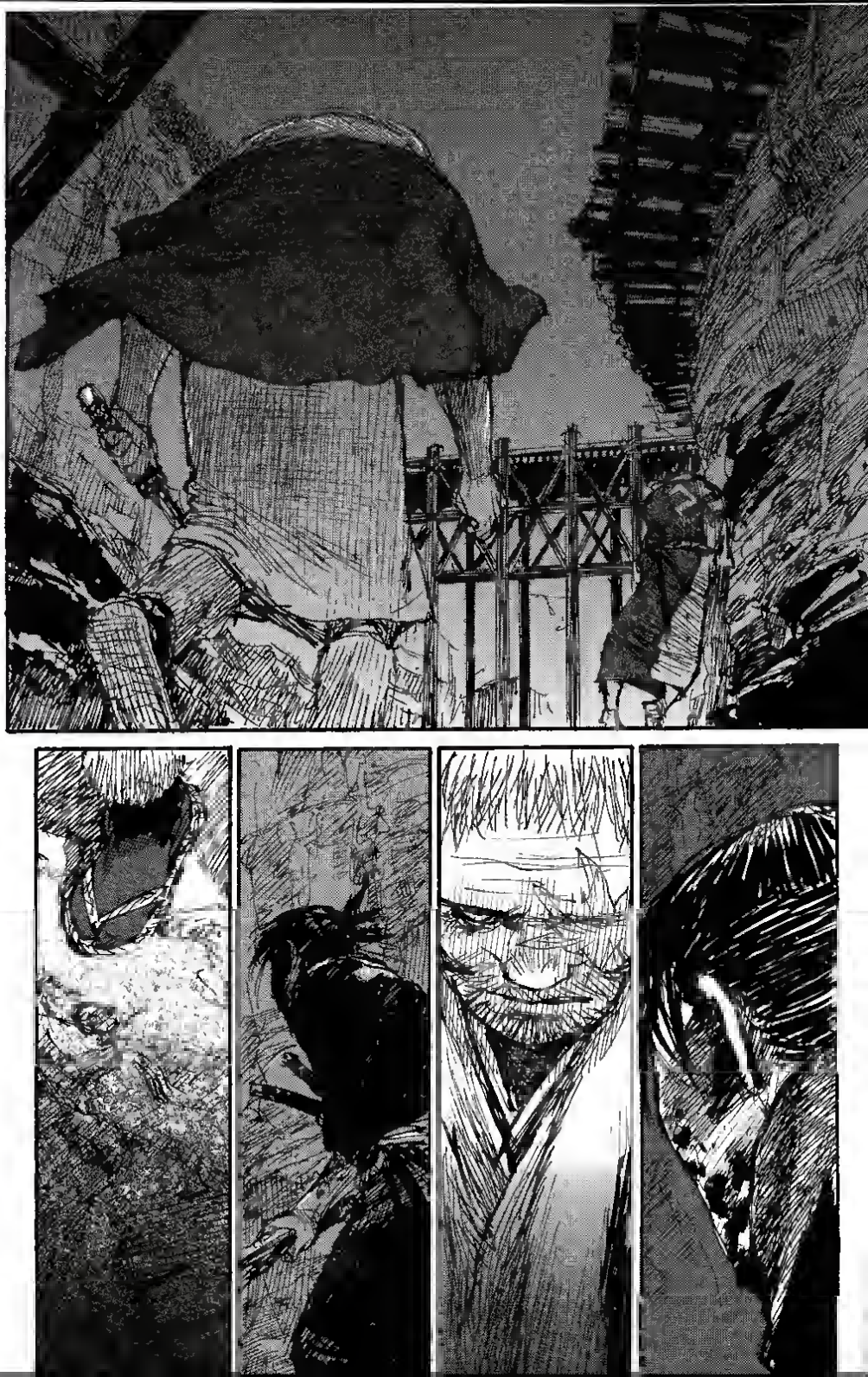

THUMP!
SHHZ
GLRRP
CATCH!

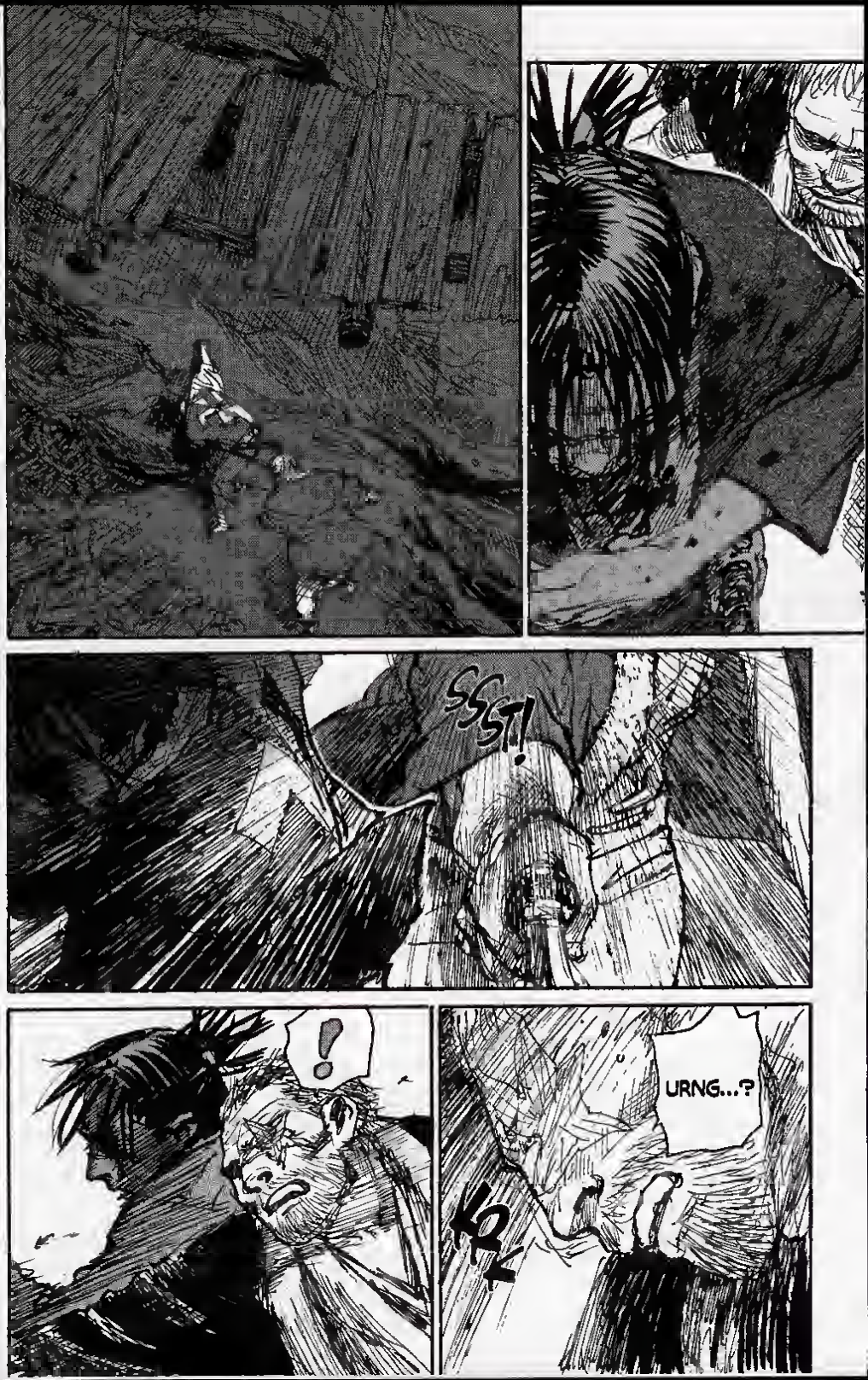
GHFF...



THIS IS TOO... FUCKED UP...
DAMN YOU, GIICHI...
GOD DAMN YOU...
WELL... NOT HIS FAULT...
TEARING OPEN... NEWEST ONES FIRST...

ALL THAT? FROM ONE STROKE...?
IT'S... HORREN-DOUS...
UNGAINLY BLADE...
WITHOUT POISON, GOOD FOR NO-THING!
THIS! FOR A WOUNDED BEAST.

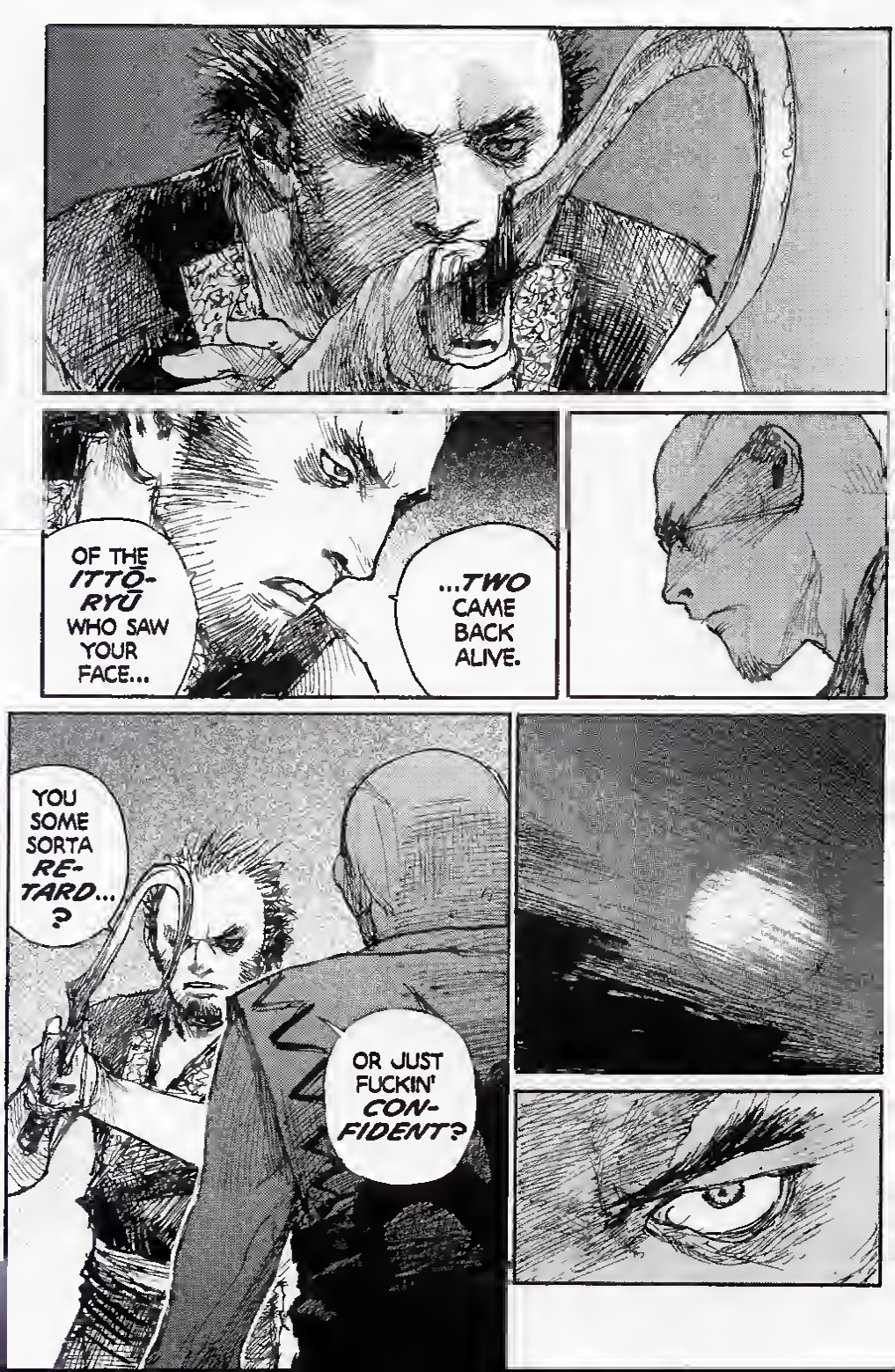



SSST!
!
URNG...?

KBA!

SHIT!
CAN'T GET A FRIGGIN' HIT...
TIPTOEING AROUND A GUY WHO CAN'T SEE?
YOU'RE CAREFUL, I'LL GIVE YOU THAT.

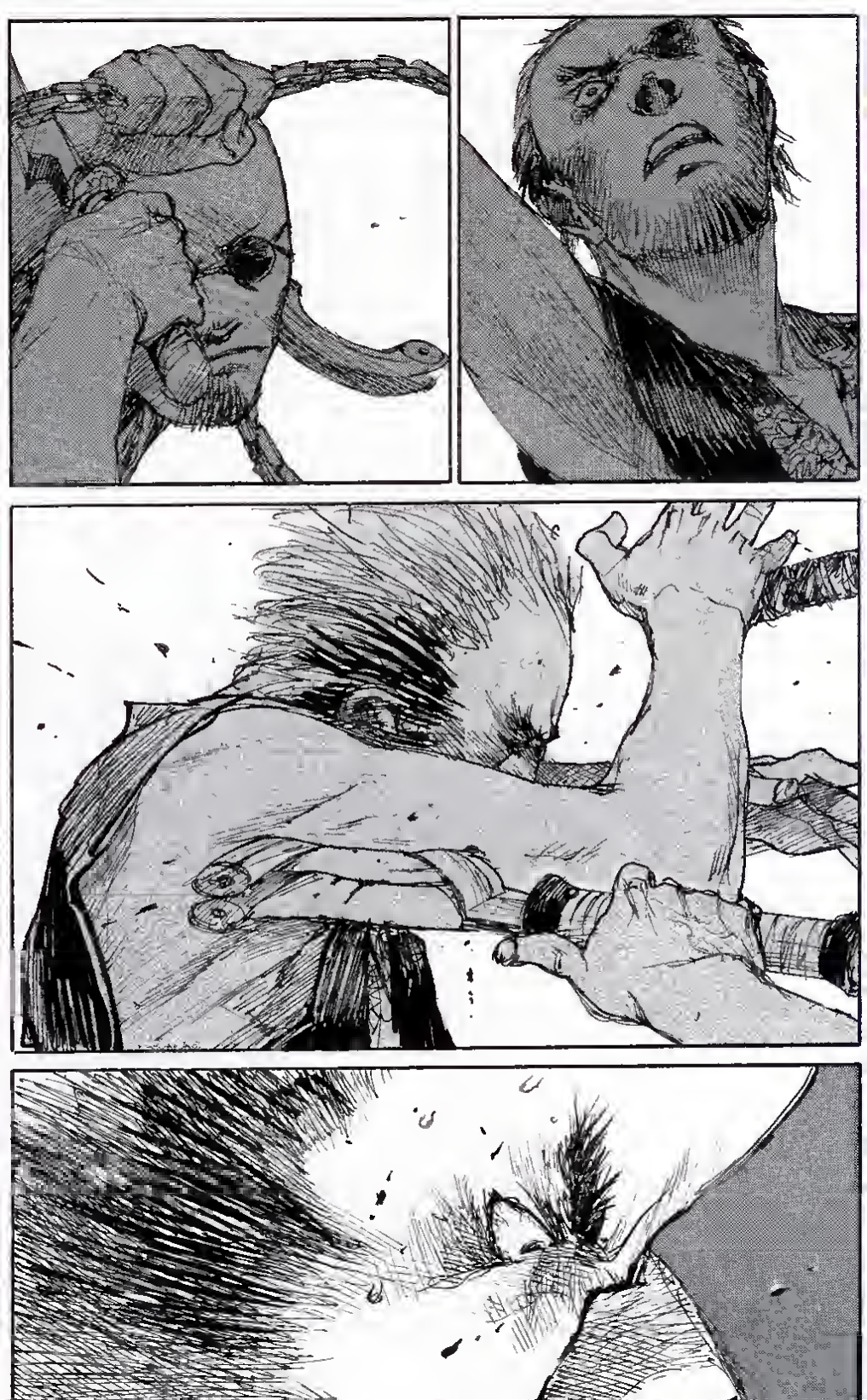
SO LISTEN UP, ITTŌ-RYŪ!
THAT MUCH JUICE WON'T KILL ME.
I KNOW MY OWN CARCASS, SEE?
SO I'M LIKE THIS FOR... HALF AN HOUR? THEN MY BODY'S BACK...
HACK ME TO PIECES FIRST...
...AND YOU WIN.
WAIT TOO LONG?
AND TRY YOUR DAMNDEST, YOU'RE GONNA DIE!


OF THE ITTŌ-RYŪ WHO SAW YOUR FACE...
...TWO CAME BACK ALIVE.
YOU SOME SORTA RE-TARD...?
OR JUST FUCKIN' CON-FIDENT?

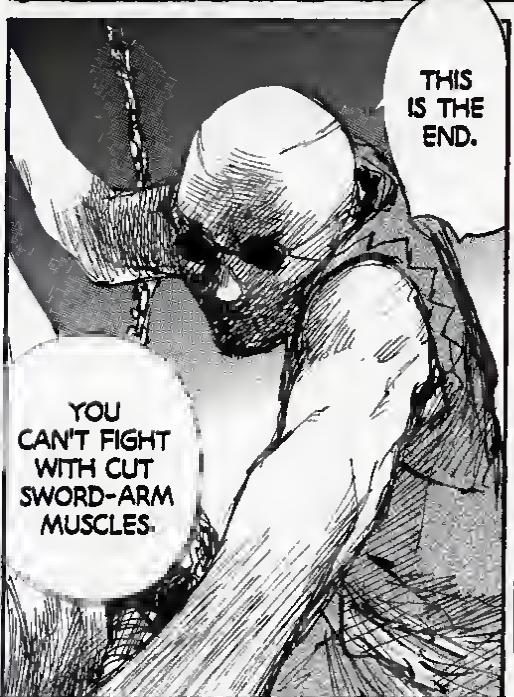
SHING!
THAP
CHRING!

!!
THAD

FWT!



GRRG...
AUGH...!


THIS IS THE END.
YOU CAN'T FIGHT WITH CUT SWORD-ARM MUSCLES.

.....
.....
.....

?!
WUSH

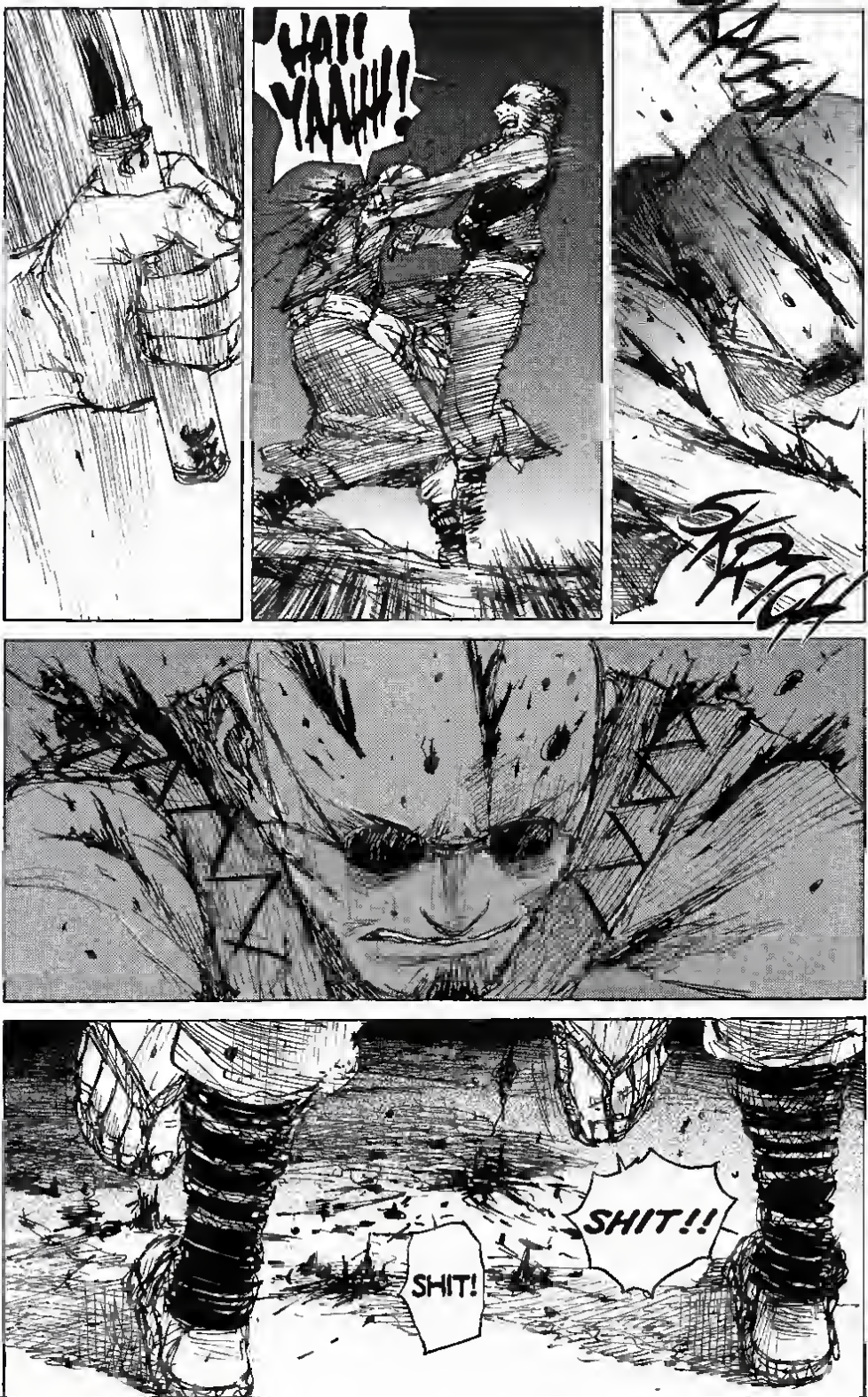
KASORI FUJIAKI...
REMEM-BER IT...
NNNG!
THE LAST ITTŌ-RYŪ YOU'LL EVER FIGHT!!

SHRRKKK
KRRRR

GLUCK!
KRIEG!
SHRRRK

?!
MOTHER--!
CHNG!

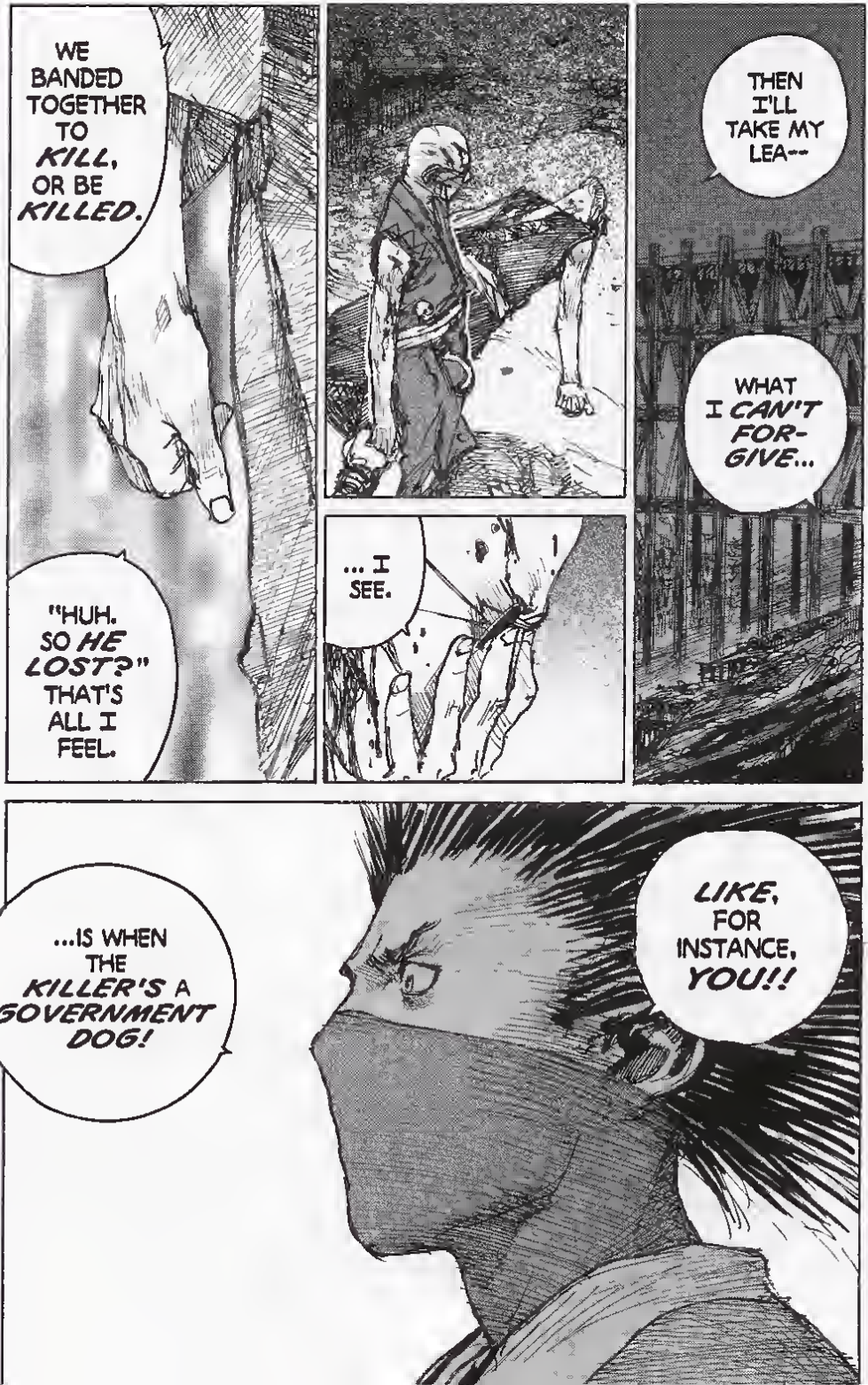
HACK
GARGK...
!!
CHKSHEKCHKK
FU...
FUCKAAH...
!!


HAH! YAAAH!
SHAAAA
SKRTCH
SHIT!!
SHIT!

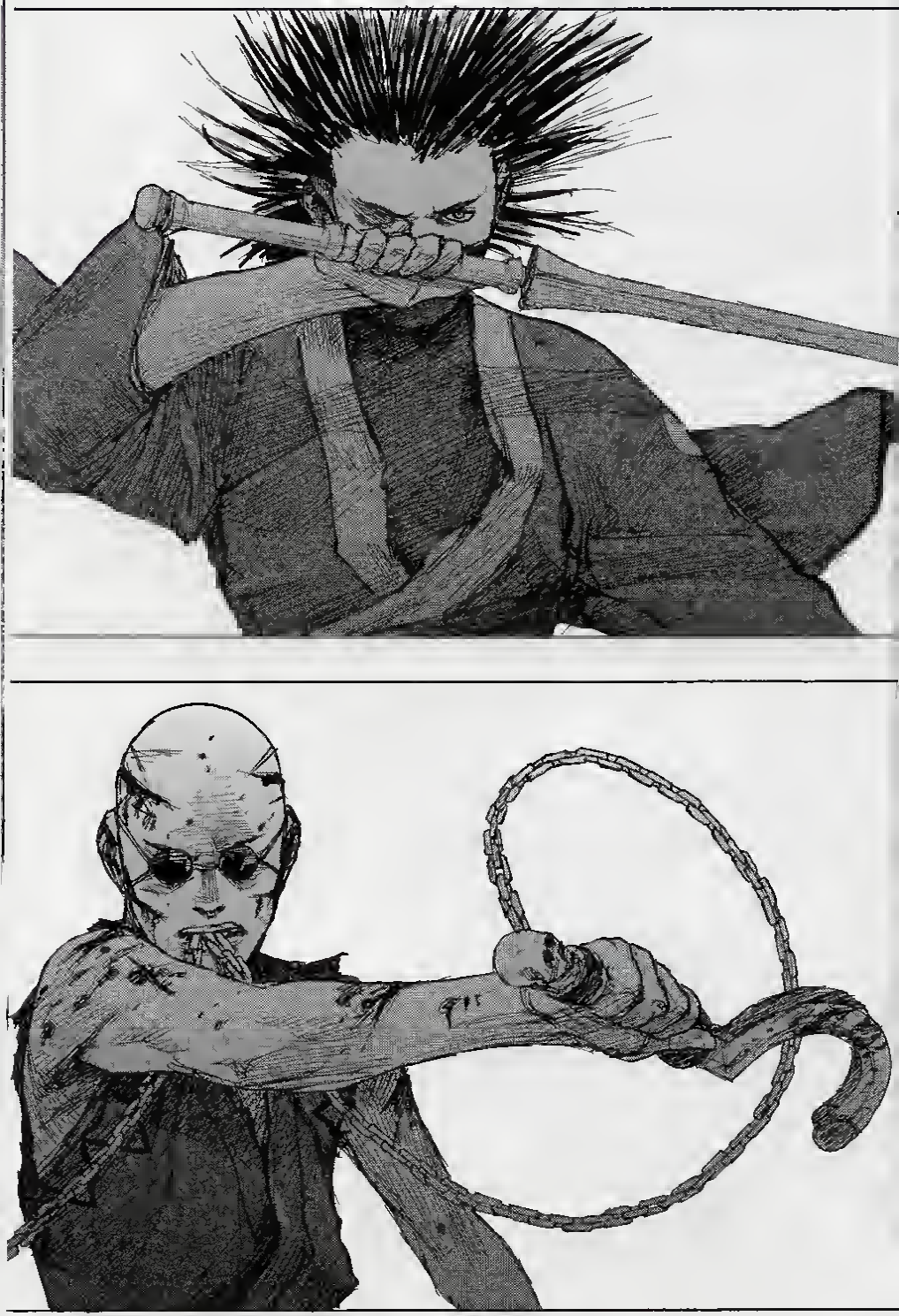
DIE!
DIE!
DIEE!!

HE'S DEAD.

HE WAS A STRONG MAN.
BUT ONE WHO PANICS AT DEATH CANNOT ESCAPE IT.
WHAT WILL *YOU* DO?
NOTHING MUCH.
KILL THE GUY WHO DID MY *CREW*...?
I'M NOT INTO THAT.

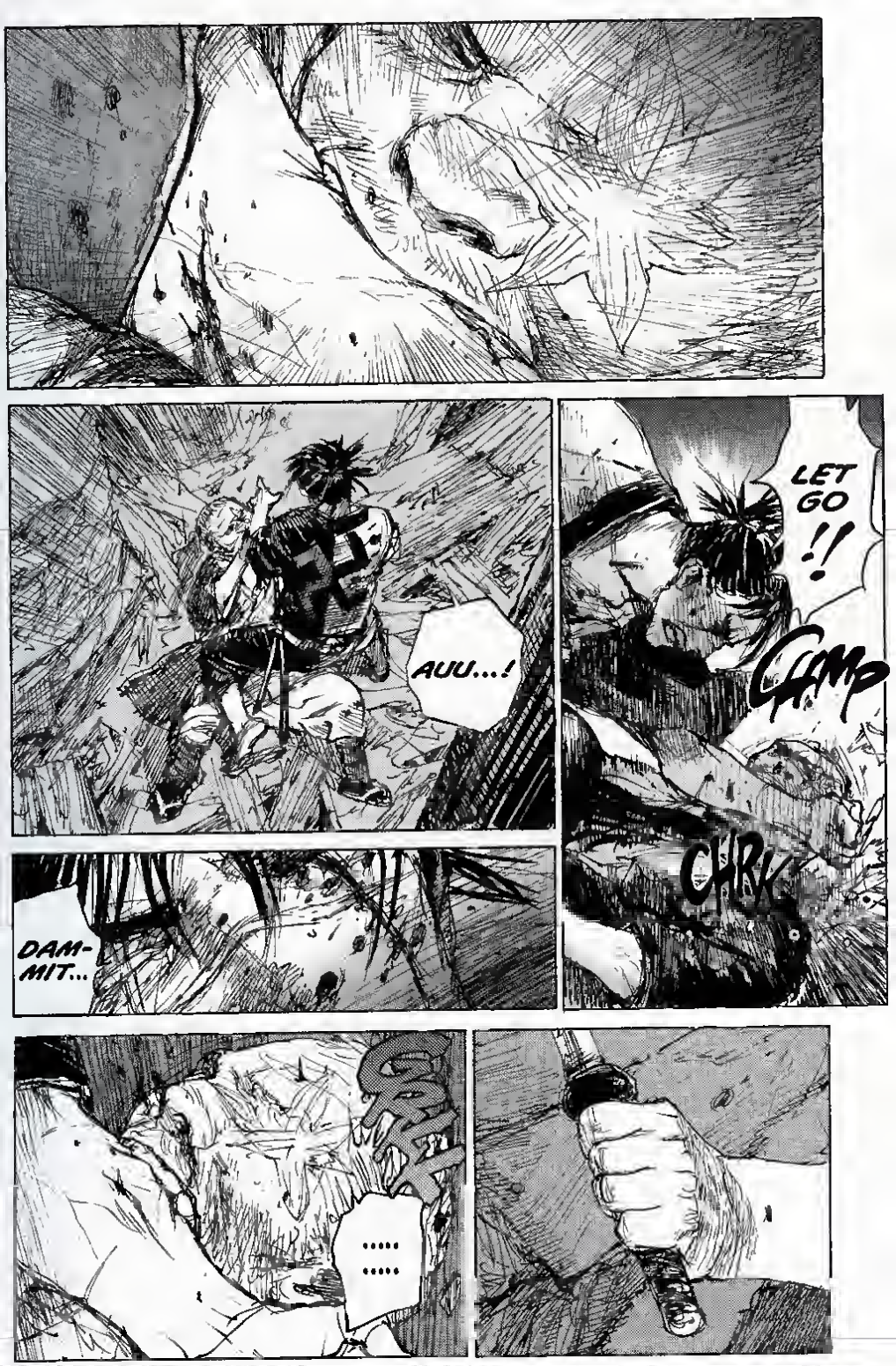

WE BANDED TOGETHER TO KILL, OR BE KILLED.
"HUH. SO HE LOST?" THAT'S ALL I FEEL.
... I SEE.
THEN I'LL TAKE MY LEA--
WHAT I CAN'T FOR-GIVE...
...IS WHEN THE KILLER'S A GOVERNMENT DOG!
LIKE, FOR INSTANCE, YOU!!

YOU SAY WE BETRAYED THE ITTŌ-RYŪ?
'CUZ YOU WERE NEVER OUR ALLIES!
BETRAY-ED? WE WEREN'T BETRAYED.
YOU FOUND A WAY TO TAKE OUT AS MANY CRAZY FUCKS AS QUICKLY...
...AS PAIN-LESSLY, AS POSSIBLE! AND THE CRAZY FUCKS WALKED RIGHT INTO IT.
I'M KILLING YOU...
...FOR PETTY, PRIVATE REASONS. HOPE THAT'S OKAY.
...NO CHOICE.



SHRAK!
GOTCHA!
RIGHT, GEEZER ?!

THIS... IS YOUR HEAD...
WHICH PUTS YOUR NECK...

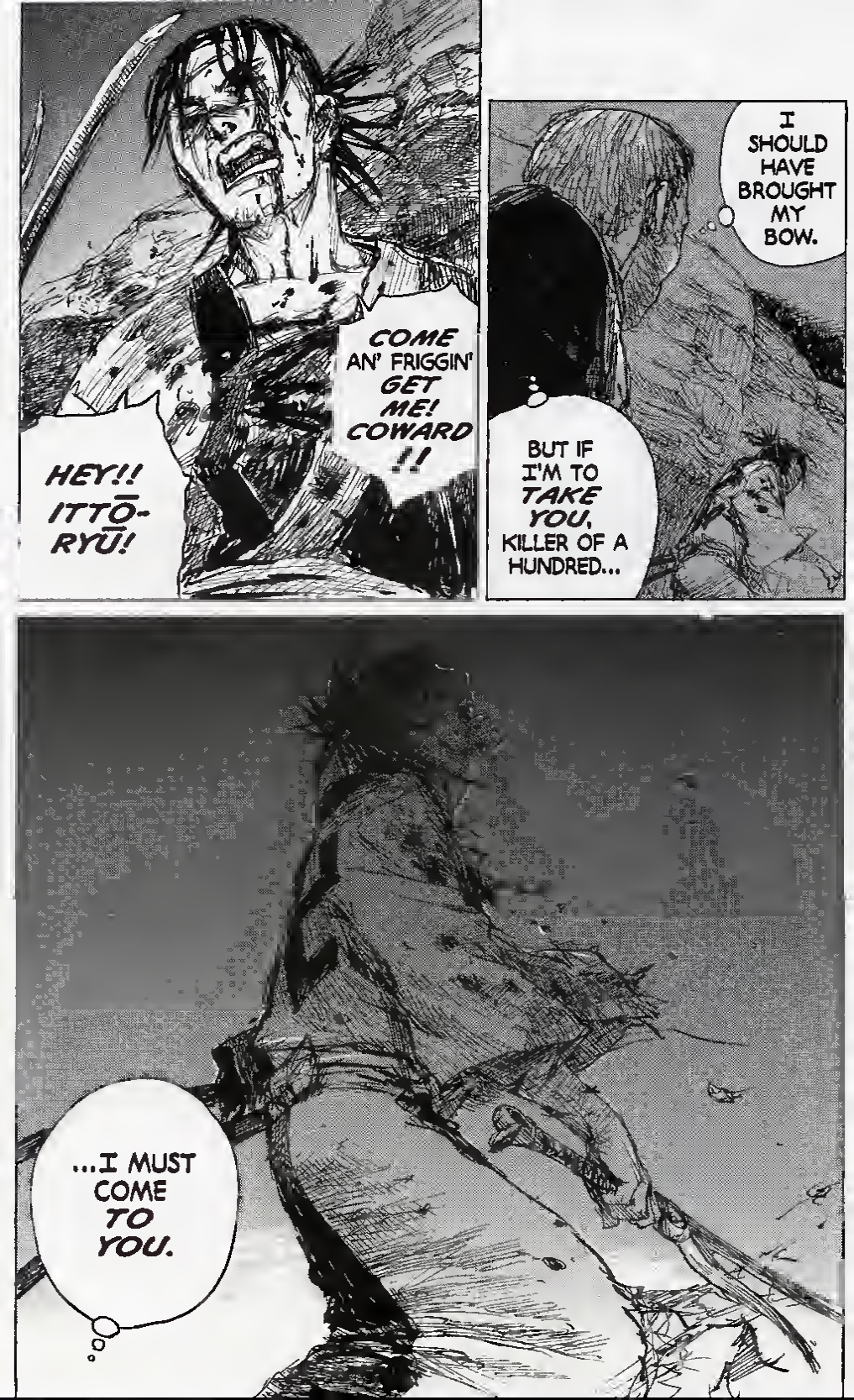

AUU...!
LET GO !!
CHMP
CHRK
DAM-MIT...
.....
.....

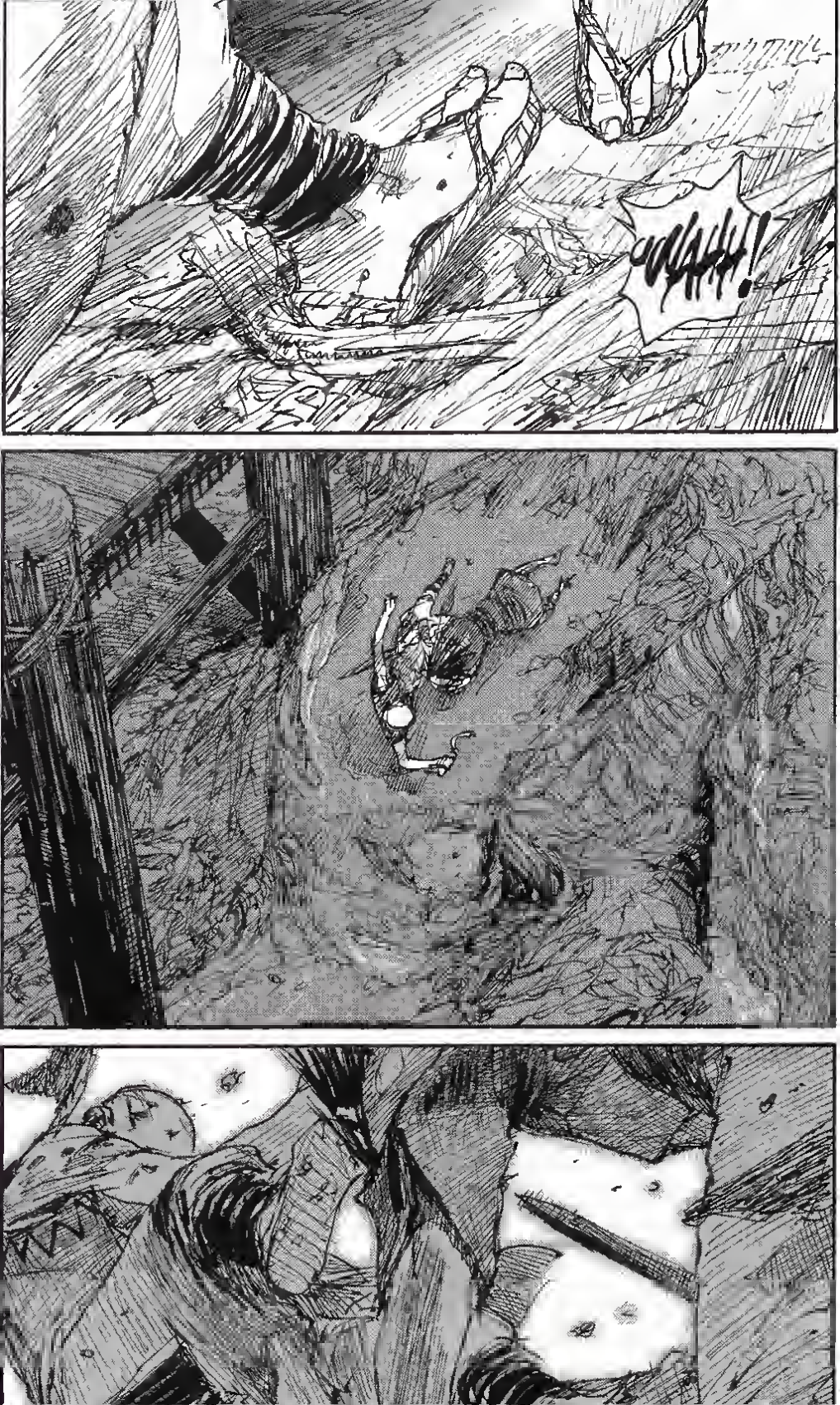
GUG...
KRAKK!

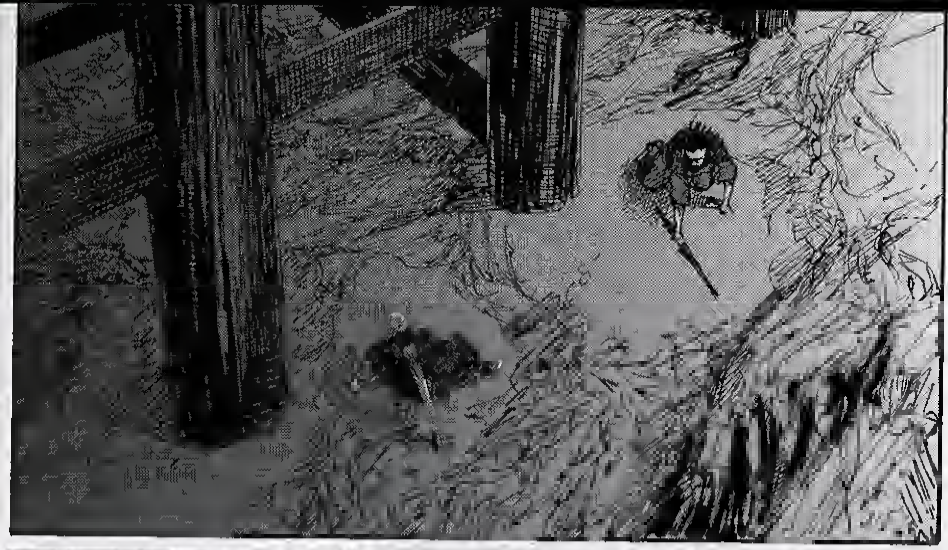
HAHF!
uhf... hff... ahff...
HRFF
HHRFF

AHHH...
GOTTA... HANG TOUGH...
FIFTEEN... MINUTES...
FIF-TEEN...
FIFTEEN FREAK-IN'...
JUST... FIF-TEEN...
TOOTH...?
FIFTEEN MINUTES?
NO PROOF, NONE...

FLEE SIGHTLESS? FOR *FIFTEEN MINUTES?* A MIRACLE...
NO... WITH ALL THAT BLOOD LOSS, EVEN *SOONER*...
EVERY *TIME*. HE *LET* ME CUT HIM TO GRAB MY SLEEVE...
MAYBE NO *CHOICE*, NOT WITH HIS *EYES* GONE.
BUT...THAT *INSANE FURY*. LIKE...HE *FORGETS* HE'S *FLESH*.
IN TRUTH, MY BLOOD *RUNS COLD*.


HEY!! ITTŌ-RYŪ!
COME AN' FRIGGIN' GET ME! COWARD!!
I SHOULD HAVE BROUGHT MY BOW.
BUT IF I'M TO TAKE YOU, KILLER OF A HUNDRED...
...I MUST COME TO YOU.

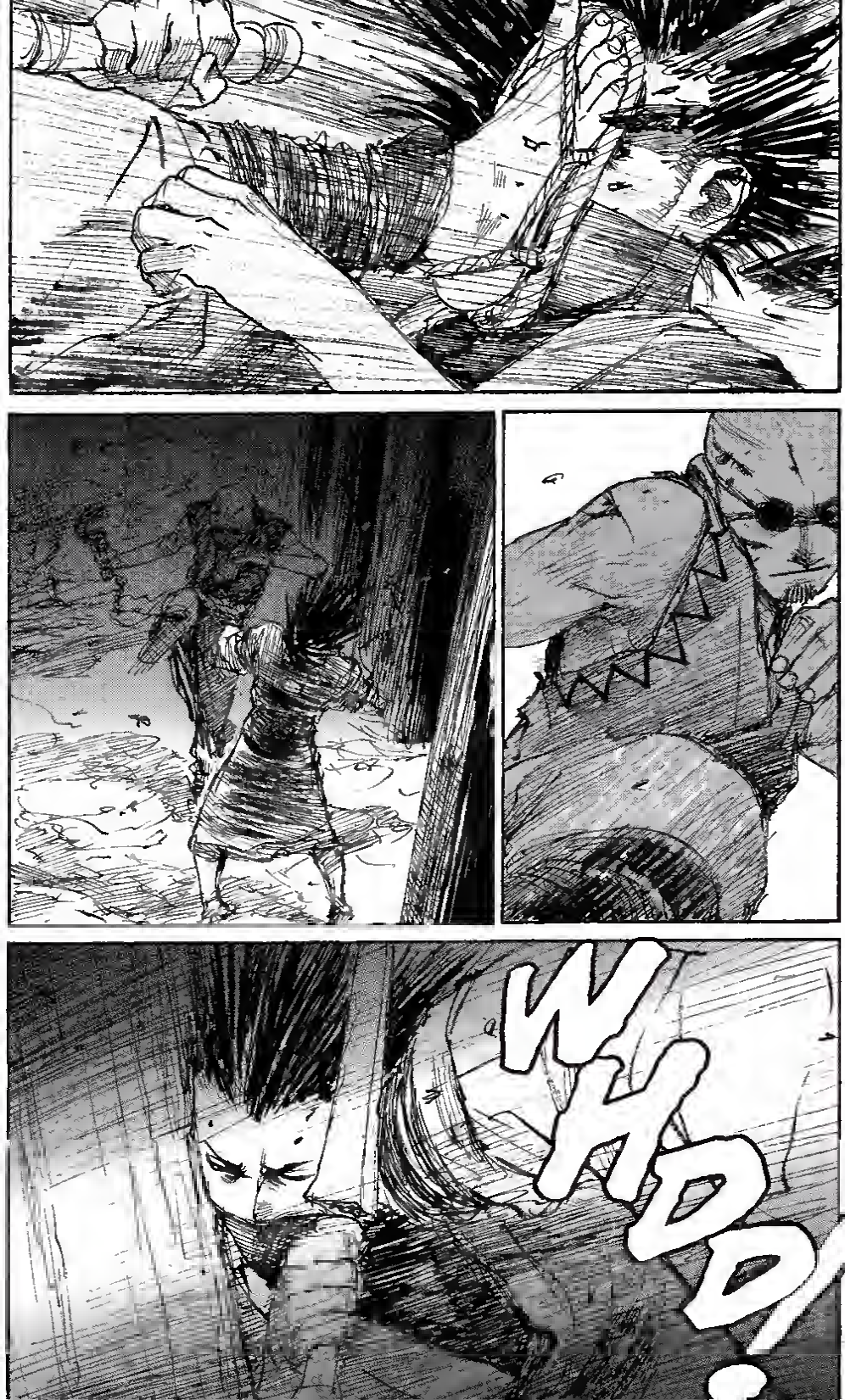

AAAH!

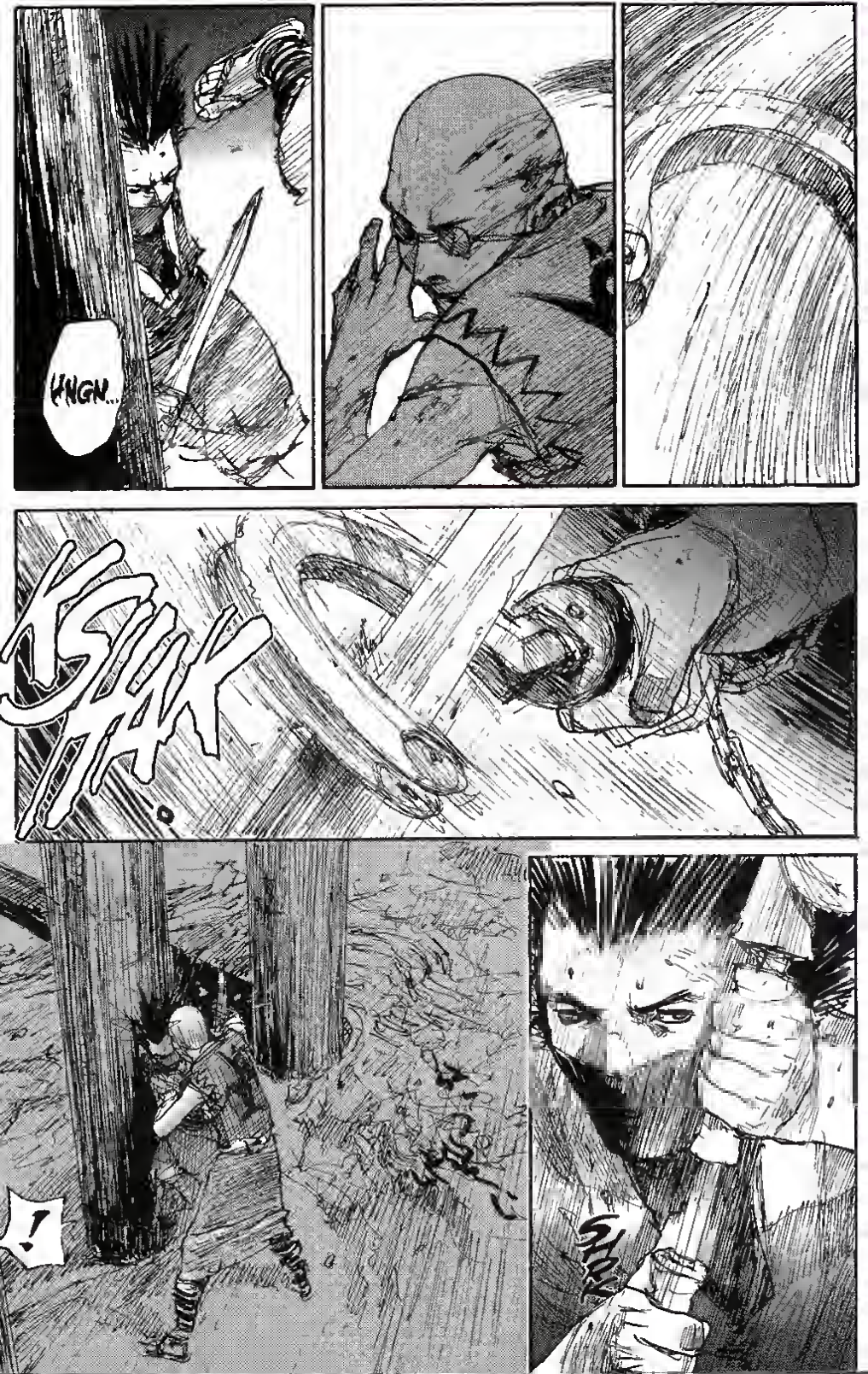


DAMN... MY LEG...

FWAH

!!
...NGN!


WHDD!


HNGN...
KSHAK
!
SHU

CHUK!

FFF
GUESS YOU KNOW IT... THE PROBLEM WITH THAT SCYTHE.
YOU CAN'T RUN ME THROUGH!
...MY SWORD CAN ALWAYS BLOCK IT.
IF IT COMES FROM THE SIDE...

TO BE CONTINUED...!

LETTERS

send letters to:
BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL, c/o DARK HORSE COMICS,
10956 SE MAIN STREET, MILWAUKIE, OREGON 97222
www.darkhorse.com • blade@darkhorse.com

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"Manji and Rin" by Tagalog, Pasig City, Philippines

Dear *BOTI*,

Blade of the Immortal was one of the first manga series I had the pleasure of reading, and it immediately captured my imagination. Years later, I have read many more manga books and my tastes have changed quite a bit, but Hiroaki Samura's masterpiece remains my favorite comic from the land of the rising sun. The story is gripping, the characters are very deep, and the artwork is flat-out gorgeous, with a unique edge that's rarely seen in manga. And while Samura has shown that he does not need the use of violence to tell his story in a suspenseful manner, *Blade's* fight sequences are some of the best I've ever seen in graphic fiction. There is such detail to the warriors' movements, and the pacing is always fast and furious. There are many great fights in *Blade of the Immortal*, but the one that really stood out in my mind is the epic duel between Shira and Magatsu in the *Autumn Frost* volume.

Even before the swords start swinging, this battle is perfectly set up. Magatsu is a protagonist that I can really identify with and admire. He isn't perfect by any means and is even an enemy of the main characters, but his determination to bring the murderer of his girlfriend to justice struck me as truly heroic. Filled with an angry passion for his quest, I could tell that he would never give up until he felt that his beloved O-Ren was at peace. Ironically, it's the villain Shira that really steals the show. Shira's character is so over the top that I couldn't help but become fascinated by him. Twisted, sadistic, and totally psychotic, Shira is perhaps the greatest villain in manga. The brutish way he spoke, his erratic temper, even his physical appearance made watching him, despite him being a despicable monster, an awesome experience that I'll never forget.

When the battle starts, it's fast and brutal. The action left me in awe. The events of the duel truly shocked and surprised me. I could see the expressions of rage and anguish on the fighters' faces. Many writers spoil battle scenes with useless dialogue, but Mr. Samura actually used it perfectly to enhance the mood. Shira's speech on what attracts him to a woman was one of the most disturbing things I've ever heard, and Magatsu's reaction perfectly mirrored my own. By the last frame of the battle, I was still excited and begging for more.

"Rin" by Lucius Romero, Colorado Springs, Colorado

More awesome fights like this one are sure to be in *Blade of the Immortal's* future, and this is just one of the reasons I feverishly anticipate each new issue. I think Dark Horse deserves much praise for handling Hiroaki Samura's brilliant epic with such care and dedication. To all the editors (and of course Mr. Samura), keep up the great work. I'll be supporting you every step of the way.

Wilson "Huffy" Huff
Boston, Massachusetts

"Magatsu" by Jamie Umstattd, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Thanks, Wilson! Your favorite manga villain is set to appear again soon. *Shiver!* Way too soon! Another chilling Shira scene will be haunting us all when *Blade of the Immortal* #104 hits the stands!! New readers can indeed find that great dogfight between Magatsu and Shira in *Autumn Frost*, the twelfth Dark Horse *Blade of the Immortal* volume (*BOTI* monthly issues 73 to 78).

Hiroaki Samura,

First of all, congratulations on reaching issue one hundred. I have been following Rin's quest for redemption since Manji's first battle with Magatsu. Some unforgettable battles and moments have occurred. One that really won a character over for me was the ordeal that Hyakurin endured, escaping horrific assault by diving deep into her psyche. Absolutely breathtaking storytelling, Hiroaki-san! I just finished issue #95, and I didn't even realize what happened on the final page until I was sitting there looking at the cover afterwards. Hyakurin's hand over her belly, puking on the final page! Man, that is messed up or a blessing in disguise. It's gonna be interesting to see where you take this. Again, incredible work. Thank you very much!

Mario Montes
via email

Yessir, Mario, looks like Hyakurin is preggers ... and, in that same issue (*BOTI* #95), we find out that Giichi's son has died. With one panel (the look on Giichi's face when he gets the news), Giichi's personality deepens in a surprising way. Just another example of how Samura-dono masterfully provokes us with the emotional repercussions of events "large and small" and with unseen horrors (as well as with the bloody, visible ones).

To Dark Horse Comics,

Thank you so much for bringing *Blade of the Immortal* to the English-reading population. Thank you, thank you, thank you! I can't imagine what it would be like if it weren't so.

Also, as an illustrator, I am always very picky as to what comics I buy and read, but I can still remember with crystal clarity five years ago when I first saw O-Ren's picture (which is now on the outside back cover of the *Dark Shadows* trade paperback) from a magazine. At the time, I had never seen any of Hiroaki Samura's work. I was so blown away with the way he drew things, which was unlike anything I had ever seen before. Samura's artwork is so mature, classy, and dramatic, all at the same time. To top it all off is the fact that it came from the mind of just one guy! One guy who drew from inside himself many characters with very, very deep emotions and distinctive personalities. Samura makes you feel like they're actually living and breathing people. If not for the really amazing twists he provides in his storytelling, the facial expressions alone would make this title a good buy. I have never seen anyone use a hand, feet, or even the ceiling to convey emotions so well!

Truly, there is no other manga to be compared to this one, and you can take that to the bank.

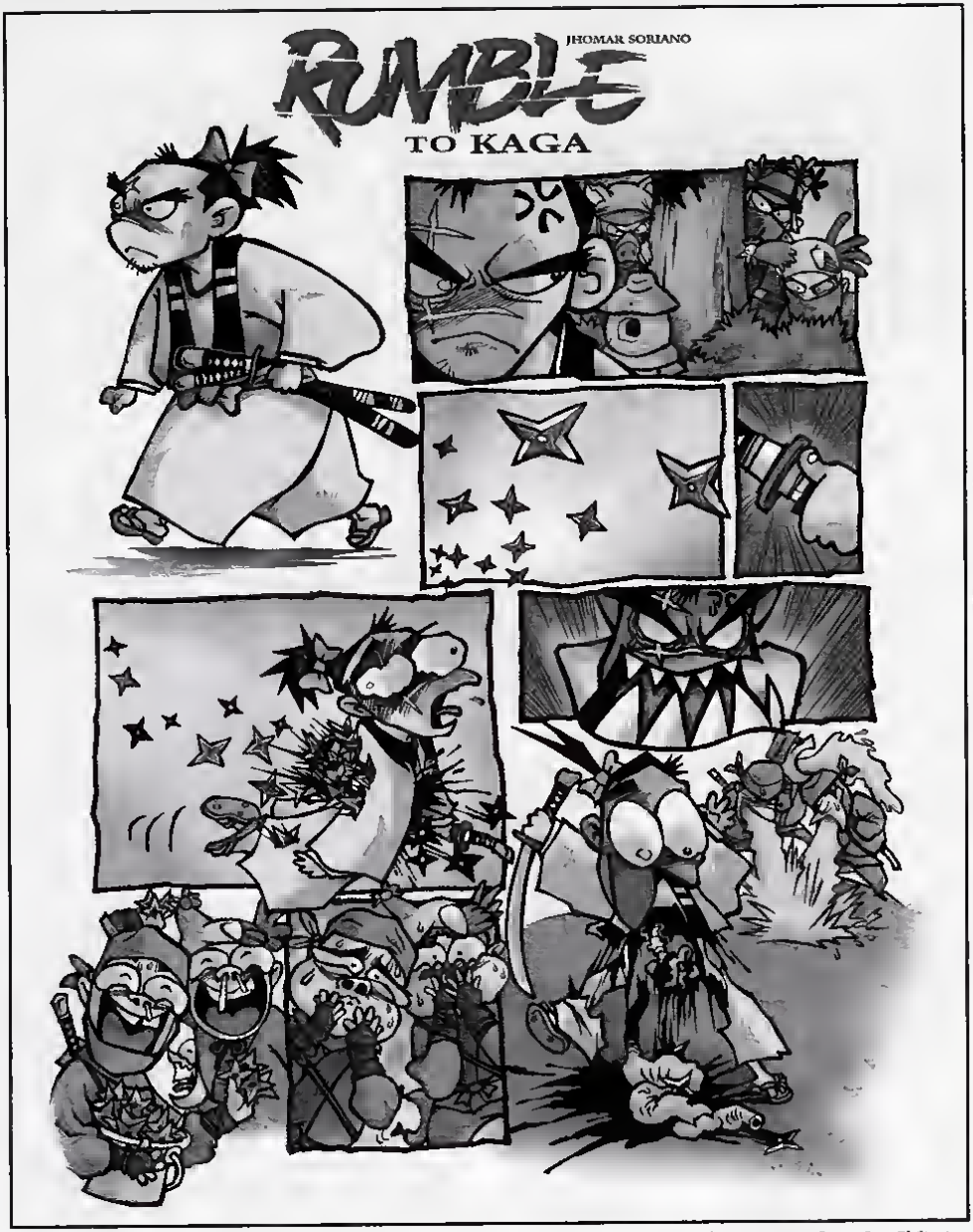
Much obliged,
Jhomar M. Soriano
Pasay City, Philippines

The image of O-Ren that Jhomar speaks of was used as the cover for Dark Horse's *Blade of the Immortal* #32 issue. The next, hilarious *Rumble To Kogo* strip by Mr. Soriano will appear in *BOTI* #102.

Blade letters,

"Familiarity breeds contempt." However, Manji's first encounter with Magatsu still entertains me a billion viewings later. *Blade of the Immortal* is like a favorite song that evokes a joyous feeling years down the road. The lyrics, beats, or rhythms have a subtle longevity that endures. It impacts your life and comes

"Giichi" by Stephen Finch, Holt Australia



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"Rumble to Kaga" *by Jhomar Soriano, Pasay City, Philippines*

to define a small part of who you are. There is no clear formula to create such an item; it's achieved through talented selection and balance of the elements of the medium. Samura's style is both simple and complex. It's accessible and engaging on the first read, yet subsequent viewings discover hidden details that continue to make the series rewarding

Thanks,
Mike Kersey
Seattle, Washington

Dear *Blade of the Immortal*,

BOTI is a great series. I have EVERY monthly release from the beginning, and I have seen from the web that there are many more issues to come. Hope you guys continue to publish them for many years!

Kind regards,
Cameron Brett
Sydney, Australia

Dear Dark Horse Manga,

Infatuated by Samura's series, I find it not so unusual to catch myself wondering what the future holds for the characters. I respectfully (I'm not sure if I know what that means) offer the following scenarios:

Our translator, Dana Lewis, on her Edo commute

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Pushed beyond their endurance, the *kessen-chu* (blood worms) default on their warranty, leaving Manji to collapse in a pile of raspberry goo, soon scooped up by Sori and his daughter, who have degenerated into vampirism in their search for ever more quantities of blood for his paintings. Hyakurin emerges from therapy to open a specialty store called "Shop Till They Drop - Teenaged Clothing for the Middle-Aged Assassin on the Go." Giichi manages to lose an autobiographical book deal after informing the publisher that the classified information contained therein means that he will have to track down and kill everyone who reads it. He later saves the contract with a compromise to kill only those who write negative critical reviews. Makie and Anotsu, trading on their slender good looks, move to Milan to embark on lucrative modeling careers. Rin and Magatsu reach a compromise, go into business together, and develop a colorful line of plastic footwear that reinvigorates the sandal market in greater Edo.

Jamie Umstattd
Suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Nice, Jamie! There are plenty of shocks and twists ahead, so some of your predictions may come true. We'll see. I'm betting on a remorseful, tap dancing Shira to change his life with a successful vaudeville career.

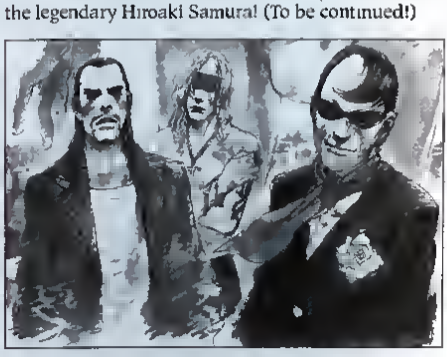
Congratulations to Samura-dono for a recent Eagle Award win! *Bfade of the Immortal's* U.K. readers and the fine folks over at the Eagle Awards named *Blade of the Immortal* as 2004's *Favorite Manga Comic*! Thanks to our monthly fans for writing and sending in some stunning pieces of art for this milestone issue. Keep 'em coming! Thanks also to our batch of international pros for taking the time to contribute pages: Francisco Paronzini (Argentina), Jhomar M. Soriano (Philippines), and Andie Tong (Australia). The delightful "Biography of Hiroaki Samura, Part One" piece first appeared on the dust jacket of the Japanese edition *Bfade of the Immortal*, Volume 14. (Do you recognize all of the heavy metal references?) Kosuke Fujishima, *Oh My Goddess!* creator, was kind enough to grant us permission to use the two Samura pinups that first appeared in Fujishima's *You're Under Arrest! File X* collection. *Arigato!* See you next month, when Magatsu says "Got Yaahh!"

--Philip Simon

BIOGRAPHY
of Hiroaki Samura, Part One

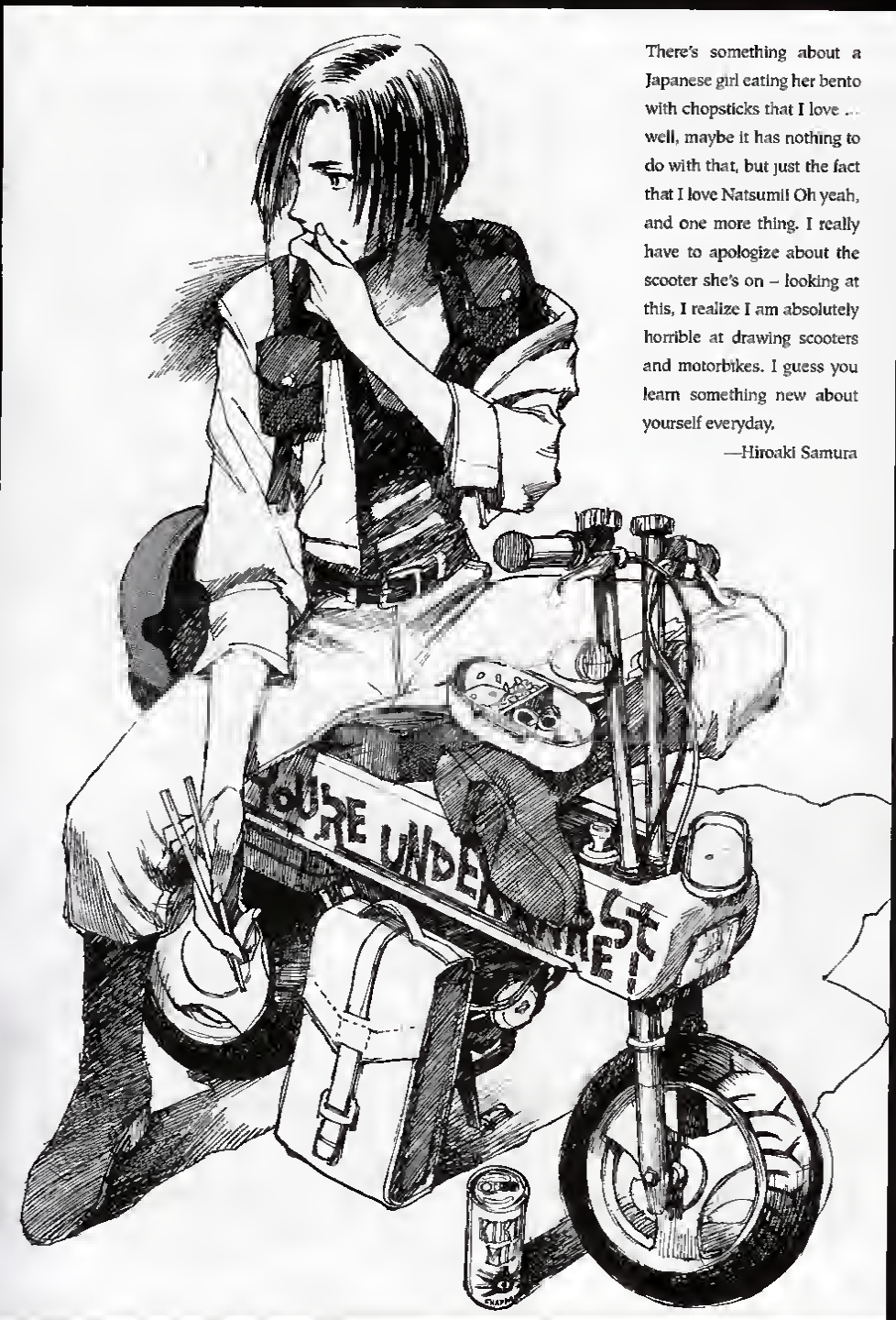
(Translated by Dana Lewis)

It was 1977, and Nico Belladonna was working at a Birmingham steel mill by day and putting up flyers at bookstores by night for performers to start a new unit. Mikael Hanneman, an art school student with his own *dojinshi*, pounded on the door of Belladona's flat. It was the beginning of The Ironcock, (or "Steel Rooster" in Japanese), the earliest incarnation of the legendary manga unit, Hiroaki Samura. In just three days, on a rock-bottom budget of 150 pounds, the duo ripped out storyboards and rushed out to audition with local comic magazines. But editorial departments refused to take them seriously. "Cut off the long hair and we'll give you work," was all they said. It was the heyday of New Wave Manga, and the Samural Manga The Ironcock wanted to draw was being trashed as Old Wave. The streets had ruled: Old Wave was dead. The boys of The Ironcock were crushed, but fate was about to turn their lives upside down. A friend from Mikael's art school days introduced them to his Asian roommate, a student at the Arling Art Academy. His name was Guo-myun Li, but he went by another moniker not soon to be forgotten: "Sniper Lee." Lee skimmed Nico and Mikael's storyboards and made a counter-pitch. "You sods, you satisfied with this, you wasting your time! You gotta make more original comic or no good! You have to show unique aesthetic consciousness! If Sniper Lee join your unit, that what Sniper Lee do!" The next year, 1978, the trio decided that The Ironcock needed an inkerist if it was to break into the big time, and the auditions began. Legend has it they fired six inkerists in a row before finding their "Lucky Seven," the "Seventh Inkerist," Jean "Little" Nikita. "One look, and me and the blokes knew he was the killer inkerist we'd all been looking for. He couldn't talk, but he had this vibe. That's all it takes." (from a Nico interview) With the addition of the "Big Giant" Little Nikita (people had dubbed him "Little" to mock his height), the unit was psyched. In a flash, they changed their name to Thunder Aquarius. And thus was born the mothership of that super manga unit fated to set the whole universe afire with *Blade of the Immortal*: the legendary Hiroaki Samura! (To be continued!)



The founding members of Hiroaki Samura. From front to back, Sniper Lee (storyboards), Nico Belladonna (pencils), Mikael Honneman (screen tone), Little Nikita (inkerist)

Pinup by Hiroaki Samura, from Kodansha Ltd.'s *You're Under Arrest! File X* collection.



There's something about a Japanese girl eating her bento with chopsticks that I love ... well, maybe it has nothing to do with that, but just the fact that I love Natsumi! Oh yeah, and one more thing. I really have to apologize about the scooter she's on – looking at this, I realize I am absolutely horrible at drawing scooters and motorbikes. I guess you learn something new about yourself everyday.

—Hiroaki Samura

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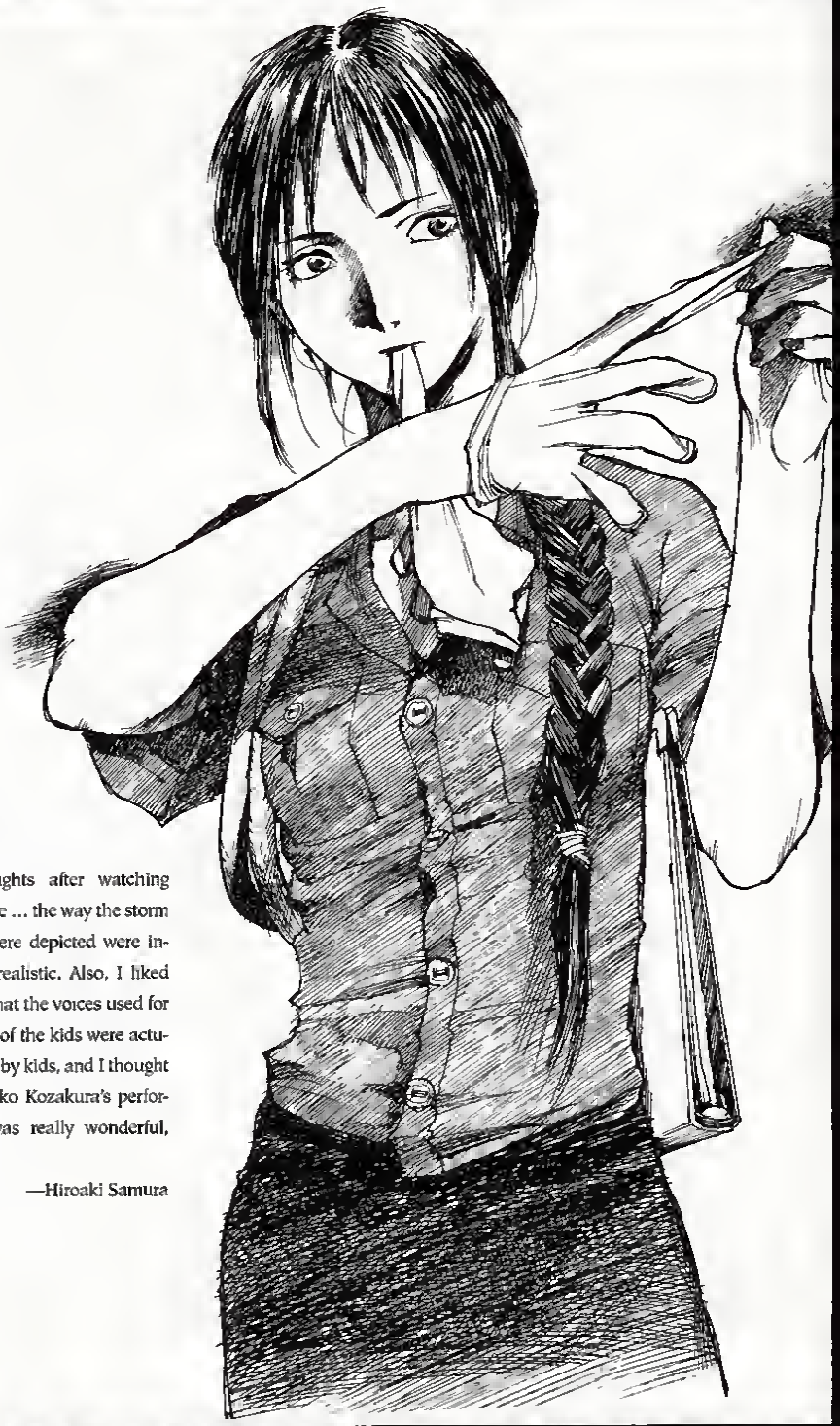

My thoughts after watching this anime ... the way the storm scenes were depicted were incredibly realistic. Also, I liked the fact that the voices used for the parts of the kids were actually done by kids, and I thought that Etsuko Kozakura's performance was really wonderful, as well.

—Hiroaki Samura

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Manji!
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Manji!

Pinup by Andie Tong

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GLOSSARY

dōjō: a school for combat and self-defense training in martial arts; here, a training center for swordsmanship.

Ittō-ryū: the radical sword school of Anotsu Kagehisa.

kessen-chu: The "sacred bloodworms." A person infected by them cannot die but feels pain like a mortal.

kessen-satsu: "Bloodworm killer." A poison used to counteract the *kessen-chu*.

Mugai-ryū: criminals working as assassins for the Shogunate, earning their freedom by killing assigned targets.

ryū: a sword school.

ABOUT THE SWASTIKA

The main character in *Blade of the Immortal*, Manji, has taken the "crux gammata" as both his name and his personal symbol. This symbol is also known as the *swastika*, a name derived from the Sanskrit *svastika* (meaning "welfare," from *su* — "well" + *asti* — "he is"). As a symbol of prosperity and good fortune, the *swastika* was widely used throughout the ancient world (for example, appearing often on Mesopotamian coinage), including North and South America and has been used in Japan as a symbol of Buddhism since ancient times. To be precise, the symbol generally used by Japanese Buddhists is the *sauvastika*, which moves in a counterclockwise direction, and is called the *manji* in Japanese. The *sauvastika* generally stands for night, and often for magical practices. The *swastika*, whose arms point in a clockwise direction, is generally considered a solar symbol. It was this version (the *hakenkreuz*) that was perverted by the Nazis. It is important that readers understand that the *swastika* has ancient and honorable origins, and it is those that apply to this story, which takes place in the 18th century (ca. 1782-3). *There is no anti-Semitic or pro-Nazi meaning behind the use of the symbol in this story. Those meanings did not exist until after 1910.*

ABOUT THE TRANSLATION

The Artwork: The author of *Blade of the Immortal* requested that we make an effort to avoid mirror-imaging his artwork. Some manga are first copied in a mirror-image in order to facilitate the left-to-right reading of the pages. However, Mr. Samura decided that he would rather see his pages reversed via the technique of cutting up the panels and repasting them in reverse order. While we feel that this often leads to problems in panel-to-panel continuity, we place primary importance on the wishes of the creator. Therefore, most of *Blade of the Immortal* has been produced using the "cut and paste" technique. There are, of course, some sequences where it was impossible to do this, and mirror-imaged panels or pages were used instead.

The Sound Effects & Dialogue: Since some of Mr. Samura's sound effects are integral parts of the artwork, the decision was made to leave those in their original Japanese. When it was crucial to the understanding of the panel that the sound effect be in English, however, Mr. Samura chose to redraw the panel. We hope readers will view the un-retouched sound effects as essential portions of Mr. Samura's extraordinary artwork. In addition, Mr. Samura's treatment of dialogue is quite different from that featured in average samurai manga and is considered to be one of the things that has made *Blade* such a huge hit in Japan. Mr. Samura has mixed a variety of linguistic styles in this fantasy story, where some characters speak in the mannered style of old Japan, while others speak as if they were street-corner punks from a bad area of modern-day Tokyo. The anachronistic slang used by some of the characters in the English translation reflects the unusual mix of speech patterns from the original Japanese text.

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